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ABSTRACT

Peer tutoring refers to the process of having learners help each other on a one-to-one basis. Two types of peer tutoring are found in adult literacy and basic education: "near peer" tutoring in which one learner is more advanced than the other and "co-peer" tutoring in which the learners are fairly well matched in skill level. The adage "those who teach learn twice" is frequently given as the basis for using the peer tutoring approach. Peer tutoring also helps adult learners move away from dependence on professional authority toward belief in their own ability to create knowledge, polish their communication skills, and persist in the learning situation because of bonds developed with other learners. Adult literacy programs that are already using collaborative, participatory methods will find peer tutoring to be an extension of their overall approach. Because the instructional environment becomes more learner directed when peer tutoring is used, teachers must prepare learners prepared to assume their new roles as peer tutors by helping them establish individual learning programs and contacting their peers for assistance. Teacher comfort with and commitment to peer tutoring are crucial to its success as an approach in adult basic and literacy education. (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Peer Tutoring in Adult Basic and Literacy Education

by Susan Imel

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Peer tutoring should happen in every class. I learned a lot from helping Betty. I learned that she is an understanding, loving, quiet, shy person. I understand her for who she really is. I learned that I liked to teach. By helping her, I got to learn the meaning or the spelling of a word that I didn't know before. (Goldgrab 1992, p. 134)

These words of an adult literacy learner provide testimony to the power of peer tutoring. Yet, adult basic and literacy educators have been slow to adopt this approach, sticking instead to the more traditional, one-on-one, individualized approaches to instruction. However, support for more participatory approaches is growing (Imel, Kerka, and Pritz 1994). Like many small group learning approaches, peer tutoring can be used to sustain a more participatory learning environment. Part of the reluctance to adopt peer tutoring methods may be attributed to lack of information about using this strategy in adult settings. This ***ERIC Digest*** provides an overview of peer tutoring in adult basic and literacy education.

Peer Tutoring: What?

A number of terms, including *partner learning* (Dueck 1993) and *peer teaching* (Whitman 1988), have been used to describe the concept of peer tutoring. In the adult education literature, the term *peer* is sometimes used to describe any adult working with a learner (e.g., McLachlan 1990; Pearpoint and Forest 1990) as opposed to learners working together as peers. As used in this *Digest*, peer tutoring refers to the process of having learners help each other on a one-to-one basis (Dueck 1993). Two types of this kind of peer tutoring are found in adult literacy and basic education: (1) "near peer" in which one learner is more advanced than the other; and (2) "co-peer" in which the learners are fairly well matched in skill level (Whitman 1988).

Examples of near peer pairings include more academically capable learners working with those experiencing difficulty. When co-peers are paired, learners are able to work together as equals and gain a better understanding of the materials by learning from each other. Although most peer tutoring is done with pairs of learners, sometimes having learners work in groups of three better meets the needs of both the learners and the learning task (Dueck 1993).

Peer Tutoring: Why?

The old adage, "those who teach learn twice," holds true for peer tutoring and is frequently given as the basis for using the approach. Although a teacher can anticipate problems, questions, and concerns, no teacher can learn for another individual. Thus, when peer tutoring is adapted, learning becomes much more effective because learners are teaching themselves (Whitman 1988).

Peer tutoring can enhance learning by enabling learners to take responsibility for reviewing, organizing, and consolidating existing knowledge and material; understanding its basic structure; filling in the gaps; finding additional meanings; and reformulating knowledge into new conceptual frameworks (Dueck 1993; Whitman 1988). In either co-peer or near peer situations, both learners are likely to understand the material better by applying it in the peer tutoring setting.

Goldgrab (1992) describes an adult literacy program in Canada in which peer tutoring was adapted as a practical solution to helping the teacher deal with the large size of the class. However, both the teacher and the learners quickly realized the educational benefits of the approach for adult learners. Although some learners wanted a more traditional education with the teacher in front of the class, adults learn most effectively "from their common experiences, by identifying their own learning needs, taking ownership of their own learning, and taking an active role in evaluation" (Goldgrab 1992, p. 132).

Peer tutoring can also benefit adult learners by helping them to—

- reach the goal of self-determination as well as develop a tolerance for uncertainty and conflict
- move away from dependence on professional authority toward belief in their own ability to create knowledge
- polish their communication skills
- persist in the learning situation because of bonds developed with other learners
- increase both their motivation to learn and their self-esteem

(Dueck 1993; Goldgrab 1992; Randels, Carse, and Lease 1992; Schneider 1989; Whitman 1988).

Peer Tutoring: How?

Adult literacy programs that are already using collaborative, participatory methods will find peer tutoring to be an extension of their overall approach. However, in programs that use more traditional individualized or large group instruction, both learners and teachers will find that peer tutoring changes their roles as well as the learning environment.

When peer tutoring is used, the instructional environment usually becomes more learner (as opposed to teacher) directed, and the learners have a more significant role in helping shape the learning (Imel, Kerka, and Pritz 1994). The teacher becomes a co-learner and facilitator, acting as a guide and a coach. The teacher is no longer the person with all the answers; instead, the teacher talks with learners and offers opinions, explores strategies, and helps set goals (Goldgrab 1992).

Preparing Learners

Because peer tutoring changes the nature of the teaching/learning transaction, learners should be prepared to assume their new roles as peer tutors. Whether working in co-peer or near peer tutoring situations, learners need to be alerted to the importance of social skills in successful learning partnerships. Reminding adult learners of the connection between peer tutoring and the social skills that many already possess can help learners communicate more effectively, express support for each other, clarify their thinking, and understand their underlying feelings. Practice in encouraging, restating, clarifying, validating, and summarizing can help them assume their role as a peer tutor (Dueck 1993).

Setting the Stage

In implementing peer tutoring in adult basic and literacy education programs, the teacher's main role is to help the learners establish individual learning programs and then contact their peers for assistance (Goldgrab 1992). Teachers and learners can effectively set the stage for the introduction of peer tutoring by—

- Identifing learner strengths and weaknesses in order to match learners effectively. Adult learners can participate in this process by indicating what things they can do well and with which areas they would like assistance.
- Considering which learners might work well together and providing opportunities for work with different peers at separate times. Again, adults can be asked with which learners they might enjoy working. Also, the teacher may observe that some learners have preestablished relationships that could be used to build peer tutoring pairs.
- Having learners prepare and discuss lists of what they want in a "perfect" learning partner. These lists may help learners understand that no one individual may possess all the desired characteristics. The lists might also help learners with the task of identifying their own strengths and weaknesses.
- Providing for open discussion about ways in which people learn so that learners recognize that, although they may have preferred styles, there are benefits to learning in other styles. Asking adults to identify situations in which they were particularly successful learners and why can initiate a discussion on learning styles.
- Creating activities that enable learners to have practice teaching each other and then reflecting on these experiences. Part of the reflection can include responding to such questions as "The best thing that happened today was . . .;" "One thing that didn't go to well was . . .;" and "Something I'd like to change is . . ." By answering these questions, learners can think about changes they would like to make and develop a regular habit of reflecting on and learning from their peer tutoring experiences (adapted from Dueck 1993).

Peer Tutoring: Adult Learners' Perspective

In a brainstorming session, adult literacy students experienced in peer tutoring listed the following ideas about what is necessary for success:

- Peer tutoring should be encouraged in a class where the teacher is comfortable using it.
- Everyone should give positive feedback.
- An attitude of equal treatment should exist among co-learners.
- The learners should be willing to work together.
- The structure of the program is an evolutionary process.
- Both the teacher and the adult students learn from one another.
- The teacher must be committed to encouraging peer tutoring and using it.
- Trusting the teacher and the other learners is important.
- The teacher should understand the limits of the learners and not push. (Goldgrab 1992, p. 136)

Using the peer tutoring approach in adult basic and literacy education has much to recommend it. Like any other method, it must be used appropriately and learners must be prepared for it.

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